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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the utility and feasibility of administering achievement tests to adults in a continuing education course in French, in Scotland, in which student progress is not usually formal assessed. Subjects were 18 adults in elementary-level classes, aged 18 to over 60 years. Students were tested three times, at 3-4 week intervals, with an oral assessment consisting of three parts: an information-giving task; a discussion/decision-making task; and a role-play. Results indicate that although the assessment procedures did not appear to interrupt the normal class ambience, and there was some slight shift toward a more favorable student attitude concerning assessment over the course of the term, teachers found some practical difficulties in conducting the assessments during normal class time and questioned the value of formal assessment in such a course. A sample test item and a post-test student questionnaire are appended. Contains seven references. (Author/MSE)

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ORAL CLASSROOM TESTING IN AN ADULT FRENCH COMMUNITY CLASS

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ORAL CLASSROOM TESTING IN AN ADULT FRENCH COMMUNITY CLASS

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Abstract

A research project was carried out amongst 18 adult learners of French within a Community Education course to investigate the desirability and feasibility of administering achievement tests. The learners in these courses receive attendance certificates but are not normally formally assessed. This paper describes the project, including the assessment procedures and instruments, and discusses effects on learners and teachers. The results show that, although the assessment procedures did not appear to disrupt the normal class ambience, and there was some slight shift in the course of the term towards a more favourable attitude regarding assessment on the part of the learners, teachers reported some practical difficulties in conducting the assessments during normal class time and questioned the value of formal assessment in such a course.

1. Introduction

There is considerable interest in the development of testing in foreign language adult education and there are many large-scale tests and public examinations available, externally designed and validated and externally administered, such as the Institute of Linguists examinations, and the International Certificate Conference examinations. To our knowledge, however, there has been little published research in the area of classroom testing in non-certificated adult community classes where the tests take place during class time, and where the class teacher is the assessor. Of some relevance to our study, however, are the many assessment schemes developed for the secondary school sector, such as the Graded Levels of Achievement in Foreign Language Learning (GLAFLL) for the Lothian Region in Scotland (Clark 1987b) and the Modern Languages in Schools Project (MODLS) (Lee 1989). Under these schemes, the foreign language syllabus is organised into stages or graded objectives, each reflecting the development of communicative competence. One level of assessment is the stage test, taken by the pupils when they feel they are ready, and assessed by the class teacher. With the advent of the National Curriculum in England and Wales and of the Scottish equivalent, the Curriculum and Assessment in Scotland National Guidelines 5 - 14, these assessment schemes have largely been replaced, but the principles and methods of the school graded level schemes may be adapted for adult second language learners. Brindley (1989), for example, has argued quite strongly for the adoption and adaptation of such schemes for the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) in Australia.

2. Context of our research

In the Institute for Applied Language Studies, classes in modern languages are offered to the local community during the day and in the evenings. The classes meet once a week over a twelve-week term. Learners may attend for one or more terms, and individual attendance even within one term can be irregular. The learners in these community classes come from a range of professional and social backgrounds and enrol for a variety of motives (professional, social, personal). Age may range from 18 to 75 years.

The stated aim of these courses is to teach communication skills in the foreign language in a relaxed and convivial learning atmosphere. Entry to the different levels of classes is decided on the basis of an informal interview but, at the time of this study, there were no other forms of assessment during the course. The learners receive an attendance certificate at the end of the course.

3. Scope and aims of our research

Many of our modern language (ML) learners have informally reported negative experiences of tests and examinations taken during their school years. As language teachers, however, we felt that some measurement of progress over a 12-week term might be desirable and might be useful to some learners personally or professionally. Our aim, therefore, was to investigate whether it is possible and of value to assess adult learners in French community classes in a principled way during class time, without removing testees from the classroom, and without disturbing or destroying the prevalent relaxed atmosphere of the classes.

Specifically our research questions were:

- Is it possible to test these ML learners formally without it being perceived by them as a negative experience and/or at variance with their reasons for attending a community course?
- Is it possible to test these ML learners without disrupting the relaxed classroom atmosphere?
- Do the learners perceive the tests to be of value to them (i.e. useful or worthwhile to them personally)?
- Is it practical for the class teacher to administer these tests during class time?

Three classes at "Lower Elementary" level were chosen for the investigation - one day class and two evening classes - 24 learners in total. Due to class changes in the first two weeks, however, the sample population was reduced to 18. Although there is no formal description of language competence required for entry to this level - learner placement for all levels being based on an interview with an experienced teacher - there is a well-defined syllabus. The learners in these classes were typical of the types of learners who attend community classes in terms of age, professional and social backgrounds, and reasons for attending community courses. The age range of our sample was 18-60+, and their occupations represented a wide variety of professions and also included housewives and retired people.

4. Procedure

This section describes the design procedure of the test and the underlying rationale.

4.1 Test design

Since the main aim of the syllabus at Lower Elementary level is the development of oral fluency, we decided that the tests should focus on the skill of speaking. We also felt that direct achievement tests, based on the course content, would be the most appropriate type of tests for this kind of teaching situation where there is only one class a week.

The test design was guided by Brindley's (1989) list of key characteristics of achievement tests as shown in Figure 1.

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Figure 1: Key characteristics

explicit	Assessment criteria are made explicit and are stated in terms comprehensible to the learner and to any other parties involved in the assessment.
criterion-referenced	The assessment criteria are derived from a well-defined domain of ability.
standardised	Standards of performance are defined and agreed upon with the learners and others as necessary. These may be quantified if necessary.
relevant	The performance that is assessed is seen by the learners and/or others relevant to the learners' language-learning goals.
task-related	The learner's ability to carry out a communication task for a particular purpose is assessed.

Brindley (1989:44)

The test comprised three global tasks. As Clark (1987a:11) put it:

> *... there is some sort of limit to the usefulness of analysing tasks into constituent skills, meanings and forms, and of focusing on them separately, one after another. We must frequently, it would seem, engage in global tasks in which the co-ordination of various levels of plans and operations is involved.*

Within the constraints of a test situation, the test tasks attempted to be authentic by reflecting the interactive nature of normal spoken discourse and realistic situations.

One full test item is reproduced in Appendix A for illustration. A brief description of the three test activities is given below:

i) an information-giving task: 2 learners talking about their family and friends using a photograph.

ii) a discussion/decision-making task: 2 learners discussing a possible visit/short holiday using given stimuli of holiday publicity material.

iii) a role play: one learner and the teacher performing a role play on typical situations, such as, at the hotel, at the police station, at the 'gite', with the learner playing themselves and the teacher taking on the role of the 'official' in the situation.

Each test activity was allotted 3-4 minutes.

The test material was pre-tested with volunteer learners and minor modifications were made regarding the instructions and material.

4.2 Classroom procedure

'Rehearsal' time was built into the test situation. Although the concept of rehearsal may seem to conflict with the requirement for unpredictability in authentic spoken discourse, the experience of the school graded level schemes mentioned earlier, GLAFLL (Clark 1987b) and MODLS (Lee 1989) led us to believe this was a desirable element to include. Pupils in the GLAFLL scheme "only take the Stage test when it is certain they can pass it. They take it, therefore, when they are ready for it" (Clark 1987a:14). This meant that the pupils practised the test item before opting to be assessed on their performance. Reporting on the MODLS project, Lee (1989:74) stated that the "distinction between practice and performance may be an unnecessary one in the context of classroom assessment" since the practice-performance-assessment approach promoted a high degree of satisfaction and confidence in the pupils and enabled the teacher to identify strengths and weaknesses during both the practice stage and the assessed performance. In other words, the test tasks were seen "as a vehicle, not only for pupils to display their proficiency in final performances, but also as a means of focusing on the development of pupils' skills." (Lee op.cit.: 74).

In addition, the practice element reflected the common experience of attempting to rehearse mentally what we want to say in a foreign language situation, particularly when we are not proficient in that foreign language.

The test activities were given as normal class tasks for the whole class to perform in pairs or groups, and then learners indicated if they wanted to be tested on them, i.e. perform in front of the teacher and receive a written assessment sheet from her. The class teachers were given a set script to follow when introducing the test activities. Additional tasks of a similar type and content were provided for those who did not want to do the test.

The tests were given three times a term, each at 3-4 weekly intervals, representing the sequencing of the course work as laid out in the syllabus.

4.3 Assessment criteria

If the testing were to be of any value, it was essential that the assessment form was comprehensible and potentially useful for learners, accessible and practical for the teacher to complete in class and, at the same time, captured the elements of oral fluency. Assessment criteria, such as 'range', 'flexibility', 'size', etc., now common in the more recent communicative proficiency tests, for example, U.C.L.E.S. Certificates in Communicative Skills in English, would be inappropriate for the intended users (learners and teachers). We chose, therefore, an analytic scale with fairly traditional components: communicative effectiveness, grammatical accuracy, fluency, vocabulary and pronunciation, each with a brief gloss on its meaning. We added an element of grading so that learners could receive a profile of their performance and clear indications of any areas which needed revision. A reproduction of the assessment form is given below (Figure 2) and the performance description of an 'average' Lower Elementary learner is given in the Appendix.

Figure 2: The Assessment instrument

ACTIVITÉ: *(Tule of Task to be written here)*

Name.....

Date.....

	*EXCELLENT	#GOOD	NEEDS ATTENTION
Communicative effectiveness -getting your message across and understanding the answers			
Accuracy -the number of grammatical mistakes			
Fluency -the flow of speech and number of hesitations			
Vocabulary -the range and appropriacy of vocabulary			
Pronunciation -how foreign your accent sounds			

\# appropriate for class level
* above class level

There was sufficient space for the class teacher to add a few comments on types of errors made e.g. tenses, articles, etc. which gave additional information to the learners for revision purposes. We hoped this would prove a motivational tool for the learners.

The assessment criteria and the practicality of the form were discussed and then trialled with teachers in the French section using video recordings of volunteer learners doing the tests. A standardisation session was held with the particular teachers concerned with the testing and the results showed 90% agreement on the grading.

4.4 Questionnaires and interviews

Data on the learners and their attitudes towards testing were gathered through pre-test and post-test questionnaires, and through post-test interviews with six learners. The teachers' views were also sought through interviews after the first test and at the end of term when the three test activities had been completed.

4.4.1 Pre-test questionnaire

This comprised sections on: learners' reasons for attending community classes, self-assessment on their oral communicative ability in French, attitudes to testing, and their opinion on whether oral tests should be offered in community classes. It was designed to be completed within class time and was, therefore, short and closed-ended but with space for comments.

Although self-assessment is outside the main area of our investigation, we included it for interest to see whether learners felt able to assess their ability to interact in French in certain basic situations (a sample of the type covered in the Lower Elementary syllabus). We did not intend to take it as a reliable indicator of the learner's ability, nor to replace the teacher's assessment: we recognise that many teachers and language testers are sceptical about the ability of learners to make reliable self-judgements, and that they may need guidance or training in self-assessment (Dickinson 1987). As the same self-assessment section was to be given in the post-test questionnaire, it would be interesting to see whether there were any discernible differences in the learners' perceptions of their ability.

In the section on attitudes towards testing, the learners were given a choice of five verbal statements with a positive and negative one at the two extremes. An extract from this section is given in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Extract from questionnaire on attitudes to testing

b) **Does the thought of having an oral test in French**

appal you ☐

arouse feelings of mild anxiety ☐

leave you indifferent ☐

give you a feeling of pleasurable challenge ☐

fill you with joy ☐

The statements were based on the kind of language and feelings expressed by the learners in the pilot stage - statements such as *" I loathe being tested"* and *" exams terrify me"*. Several studies have documented the strong anxiety that learners have about tests (e.g. Madsen 1982, Scott 1986). A study by Jones *et al* , cited in Scott (1986:101), on the affective reaction by learners to language tests found that the major factor was

> *emotive reactions concerning how pleasant the experience of taking the tests was, how easy the tests were, how frustrating they seemed, how well the learners felt they performed, and how well the learners liked the tests.*

The fact that the statements also provided some amusement in the classes was welcomed in that it was in keeping with our wish to investigate the feasibility of testing without damaging the convivial learning atmosphere of community classes.

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4.4.2 Post-test questionnaire

The post-test questionnaire, given to all the learners in the sample whether or not they took any of the tests, included the same self-assessment section and the attitudes to testing section as mentioned above. It also included questions on which of the three tests were taken, when they decided to take the test, and whether they thought the tests and the feedback assessment sheets were useful to them. The final question asked whether they thought oral tests should be offered in IALS community classes. The full post-test questionnaire is given in Appendix C.

4.4.3 Interviews

Interviews were held with six learners at the end of the course in order to supplement the data in the questionnaires. The responses in the learners' post-test questionnaires were used as a stimulus for discussion and elaboration during these interviews. Each of the two teachers was interviewed twice, once after the first test and then at the end of term when all the tests had been administered. These interviews were semi-structured, based on issues related to the areas of classroom management, the test items and the additional tasks, assessment of learners and attitudes of learners, both testees and non-testees.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and information from them is discussed in the following section.

5. Results and Discussion

Data on the 18 learners who completed the post-test questionnaire is discussed below.

5.1 The number of testees and non-testees

Because of absences and the optionality of the tests, the number who took each test varies, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Learners taking each test (N=18)

Test 1	Test 2	Test 3
No	No	No
No	No	No
No	No	No
No	No	No
No	No	No
No	No	No
absent	absent	Yes
Yes	absent	Yes
Yes	absent	Yes
Yes	absent	Yes
Yes	absent	Yes
Yes	Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes	Yes
Yes	No	Yes
Yes	No	Yes
Yes	No	Yes

Of the 11 learners who decided to take the first test, all 11 also took the third test. However, only 4 learners took the second test, with 4 others being absent and 3 deciding not to take the test.

The reasons for taking the first test, as expressed by the learners in the questionnaire, are shown in Figure 5. Three learners left a blank space.

Figure 5. Reasons given by learners for taking Test One

to see my own ability
to get an idea of progress
to see my progress
useful experience/forced to think but not intimidated
to see how much I remembered
tests are necessary/makes you think when speaking
to practise speaking French
wanted to know my ability

It may be seen from these responses (actual statements given in the questionnaire) that these learners had a fairly positive attitude towards being tested. One learner expanded his comment in the interview:

> *supposing you've got to speak to a native, you've got to know how you speak. I mean, you don't have books there, so you've got to really think about it. I mean, you can just practise reading out of books all the time. And you don't really learn from that. If you actually get tested, you'll make the effort and learn.*

Another, not very confident learner, admitted *"...I prefer writing to speaking but I think I need to be made to speak and this is a good way of making you speak."*

The reasons given for taking the second test, by those learners who did in fact take it, were very much the same as the reasons given for taking the first test.

Figure 6 shows the written statements of those who took the first and third test, but not the second.

Figure 6. Reasons given by learners for not taking Test Two

didn't feel I would learn any more since I took Test One
3 tests too many in one term
not needed as another test planned for Week 11

The issue of the number of tests offered is discussed below in section 5.5 but the first statement is an interesting one, and on further investigation, it transpired that this learner felt that her oral performance had not *"changed much since the first one, plus I think that three tests in one twelve week term is a bit too much."* Presumably the third statement reflected the same opinion - that an additional test was not felt to be needed.

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Looking back to Figure 4 we can see that there was a group of 6 learners who consistently chose not to take any test at all, and their reasons are shown in Figure 7 below:

Figure 7: Reasons given by learners for not taking any tests

Test One	Test Two	Test Three
enrolled for pleasure, not to be tested	enrolled for pleasure, not to be tested	enrolled for pleasure, not to be tested
not interested from day one	not interested from day one	not interested from day one
my French is bad/ vocabulary too weak	missed too many classes due to work pressures	missed too many classes
not in a good mood	can't remember	not confident
I do not wish to be tested at this stage	I do not wish to be tested at this stage	I do not wish to be tested at this stage
I hate tests	I hate tests	I hate tests and do not need them

It can be seen from the above written statements that an individual's reasons for not taking a test were generally fairly consistent across the three tests. These learners had not only seen the tests, but practised them as a class activity, and agreed that the tests were very reasonable in terms of both familiarity of format (i.e. when compared with their normal class activities) and of demands made on the learner. One of this group said of the test tasks *"I think they were very good. I think it has been an interesting task"* but did not want to be assessed on them because *"I did not think it was important to me."*

However, not even this admitted non-threatening nature of the test instruments themselves induced those learners who had initially chosen not to be tested to change their minds. One learner who did take the tests offered her opinion on the non-testees *"I think ... well, most of the people in my class are ... late fifties, and they don't seem to be wanting to be tested. They'd rather, they're doing it for fun. And they're not bothered at how fast they're progressing, I think."*

Although age does seem to be a relevant variable in that the majority of testees were under 50 years old, the numbers in our sample are too small to draw any firm conclusions.

5.2 Learners' attitudes towards testing

Regarding the question 'How do you feel about having an oral test in French?' in the pre- and post-questionnaires, the learners' responses were as follows:

Figure 8: Responses on Attitudes towards Testing

Pre-Questionnaire Response	Post-Questionnaire Response	
1	1	
1	1	
2	2	*Non-testees*
2	2	
2	3	
2	1	
2	2	
2	2	
2	4	
2	4	*Testees*
3	2	
3	4	
4	4	
4	4	
absent	2	
absent	4	
absent	4	
absent	5	

1 = "appals you"
2 = "arouses feelings of mild anxiety"
3 = "leaves you indifferent"
4 = "gives a feeling of pleasurable challenge"
5 = "fills you with joy"

As we can see, there was a slight shift to a more positive attitude among the eight learners who opted to take some or all of the tests, and who completed the questionnaire. One learner had gone from "indifference" to feelings of "pleasurable challenge", and two had gone from feelings of "mild anxiety" to feelings of "pleasurable challenge". Surprisingly, one had changed her attitude from "indifference" to "mild anxiety" and we can only surmise that the oral tests experienced on the course were, for her, slightly threatening. Given that the test tasks were similar to class activities, that there was a preliminary practice stage, and that the assessment was conducted by the class teacher, we might have expected a greater shift in attitudes among more learners but the negative feelings about language tests seem to be deeply ingrained.

This is confirmed by the one of the teachers who talked informally with the class about the tests: "*they felt, they found the tests* [i.e. test tasks] *very interesting. It's just the fear about being tested.*" Even the word "test" seems to have caused some anxiety. One learner admitted: the teacher "*used the word 'test' and as soon as she used that I got a little bit apprehensive. I don't like the idea of having to take exams so I think if she had said 'assessment' I wouldn't have been worried.*"

It is interesting that there were two changes in attitude among the group of 6 non-testees, one from "mild anxiety" to "indifference", the other from "mild anxiety" to "appals you". Unfortunately, both left the class at the end of term and we were unable to investigate further.

5.3 Learners' views on the usefulness of the assessment profiles

The assessment forms (see Figure 2) were given to the learners on completion of the test. They provided the learners with a profile of their performance, i.e. an indication of their strengths and weaknesses. Of the 12 learners who took any or all of the tests, 11 stated that they found it useful and one left it blank on the questionnaire. As one learner said "*There's no point in doing a test if you don't get any feedback.*" One learner reported that she was pleased that the teacher's assessment

confirmed what she thought and seven testees gave examples of how they acted upon it, such as working on grammar, vocabulary study, and general revision. *"I made a long list of the vocabulary we learned, and I tried to sort out the grammar we've done." "I went back to the notes I'd taken from the class."*

5.4 Learners' self-assessment

The pre- and post-questionnaire self-assessment responses provided some interesting results. As noted in the previous section, the purpose of the self-assessment questions was not so much to attempt any serious measure of learner ability but rather to see whether learners felt able to assess themselves, and if there was any change in their perceptions before and after the test activities. Figure 9 below shows the format of the self-assessment section on the questionnaires. (The section was identical in both the pre-test and the post-test questionnaires.)

Figure 9 Learner self assessment section in questionnaires

SELF-ASSESSMENT

How well do you feel you can do the following things in French (i.e. get your message across orally and understand the answers reasonably well) ?

	easily	**with a little effort**	**with difficulty**	**not at all**
ask for things in a shop				
tell someone about yourself & your family				
give directions to a lost French tourist in Edinburgh				
order a meal in a restaurant				

Each learner assessed himself twice (once at the beginning of term and once at the end of term) on 4 different topics of the syllabus. Hence each learner had 8 opportunities of self-assessment. The self-assessment choices were coded as: "easily" = 1, "with a little effort" = 2, "with difficulty" = 3, "not at all" = 4. As we were more interested in changes of perceptions rather than individual ratings on each topic area, we calculated the means of the self-assessment ratings for the two groups (testees and non-testees) over all 4 topics.

Figure 10 Means of the self assessment ratings

	Pre-questionnaire	**Post-questionnaire**
Testees	2.2 (N=32)	1.8 (N=48)
Non-testees	2.5 (N=24)	2.1 (N=24)

1 = "easily", 2 = "with a little effort", 3 = "with difficulty", 4 = "not at all"

Two points seem to emerge from the self-assessments. Firstly, the learners who did not wish to take the tests gave themselves a lower rating than those who did take the tests, both at the beginning of term, before the tests were offered, and afterwards, at the end of term.

Secondly, both groups perceived some progress in their ability. What effects, if any, the tests may have had on the way that the learners rated themselves at the end of term can only be speculation, but it does seem that, amongst the testees, taking the tests did not cause them to lower their self-ratings. Hence we might speculate that taking the tests did not have a negative effect on the learners' own perceptions of their competence.

5.5 Learners' views on oral tests in IALS community classes

Of the 12 learners who had opted to take any of the tests, 8 had filled in both pre and post-questionnaires. All 8 had started out by responding "yes" to the question "Do you think that oral tests should be offered in French community classes at IALS?", and all 8 again responded "yes" in the post-questionnaires.

Figure 11 below shows the responses of the group of six who chose not to do any tests during the course.

Figure 11 Responses to the question of having oral tests in IALS Community Classes by those who did not take any tests

Pre-Questionnaire Response	Post-Questionnaire Response
no	optional
no	optional
yes	yes
yes	yes
no	yes
no	don't know

What is interesting here is that among this group of non-testees, there is some slight change in opinion. One changed his response to "yes", one to "don't know" and two changed to "optional". No "no" responses were received at all. We might speculate that the learners were simply being polite towards their teacher who, by this time, had clearly spent some considerable time and energy on classroom testing. Although this might well be the case, it is an interpretation which is not given any support by the learners' reasons for not taking any of the tests (see Figure 7).

These are very direct statements and do not, on the whole, appear to have been tempered by the wish to be polite to the teacher. (These reasons were given at the same time as the responses to the question "Do you think Oral Tests should be offered at IALS?", in the post-test questionnaire.)

Another possible interpretation is that these learners did not find the tests disruptive to normal class work, or at least they were not resentful that time was taken up with the tests - a view, however, not shared by one class teacher who felt rather guilty that *"it was, you know, robbing a bit of their time. They weren't being taught."*

We saw earlier (Figure 6) that a few learners felt that three tests were too many in one term. This view is perhaps understandable given that the classes meet only once a week for two hours in a 12-

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week term, but it does not appear to be a view shared by the other testees since there were no other explicit comments on the number. The teachers, however, also felt that three were too many.

5.6 Teachers' views on the classroom tests

The practical considerations of running class tests are of utmost importance. Some of the points raised by teachers have already been mentioned but the main issues seem to relate to the role of the teacher as assessor, the time needed for the tests, and classroom management. The teachers also expressed their opinions on the value of formal assessment in the community classes.

5.6.1 Role of teacher as assessor and use of the assessment forms

The teachers are accustomed to assessing their learners' performance informally but one teacher commented that the explicit change in role from helpful class teacher to assessor, although intended to make the test situation non-threatening, caused a problem in that *"they* [the learners] *were expecting me to help them during the test"* and the teacher had to refuse.

Both teachers said they found the assessment form easy to use in class but experienced other difficulties regarding the concentration required to focus on one learner at a time while other class activities were taking place.

> *I found it very difficult ... to listen properly to what the learners being tested were saying, with the other learners talking at the same time. I was trying to concentrate... but at the same time, I do it all the time, that's the point of being a teacher, you listen to everything at the same time in the class. And I got so used to it, you can't stop listening.*

One teacher, however, questioned the value of giving written feedback to learners in contrast to oral feedback. *"I think when I say during an exercise 'Oh, that was very good' or 'Yes, that was the right thing to say' or something like that, they enjoy it, you know, they appreciate it better than if I give them a piece of paper saying 'That was good. Pronunciation very good'."*

5.6.2 Time

One teacher reported that she had had difficulty in keeping to the time allocated to each test item as she felt she needed more time to assess the learners reliably; she did not like having to cut the testees short. This, however, did not seem to have been an issue with the other teacher, and in the pilot stage of this project when the items were pre-tested, we felt that the time allocated was sufficient for the learners to produce some sizeable talk. Both teachers commented that testing several pairs in the class took up a disproportionate amount of the actual lesson time although they agreed this might be more of a problem with large classes. It is interesting, however, that none of the non-testees made negative comments about either the time taken up with the learners who were doing the tests or the additional activities offered.

An additional point relating to the overall timing of the tests (every 3-4 weeks) is that one teacher felt it slightly disrupted the sequencing of her teaching programme. She preferred to choose the topics from the syllabus in an order appropriate to the needs and interests of her class rather than having a particular order imposed by the test topics.

5.6.3 Class management

The issue of having testees and non-testees in the class at the same time does not seem to have been a major problem except in the case of the teacher who felt a little guilty about not "teaching" the learners who were not being tested. The additional activities seemed to work well with the non-

testees, attracting comments such as *"good alternative"* and *"perfectly acceptable - gave me a chance to try and catch up"*.

Regarding grouping for the tests, one teacher felt that a pair containing a non-testee and a testee together put an unnecessary burden on the non-testee: *"I don't think it was fair somehow to ask them to take part in the test because they (the non-testees) felt it was not a favour they were doing their partners"*. In other words, the non-testees might feel they were not helping their classmates. This view contrasts with one expressed by a learner who wrote: *"assisted in the test - the practice was useful"*.

5.6.4 The role of formal testing in adult community classes

Both teachers felt that the test activities and the additional activities for non-testees were interesting and stimulated good oral interaction among their learners. They questioned, however, the need for formal assessment during an adult community course although they accepted the fact that it appeared to be of value to those learners who had opted to be tested. One teacher put herself in the position of a language learner and said: *"being told formally what my weaknesses are because I haven't succeeded in such and such piece in the test... would not help me because I would know before what are my weaknesses"*. The other teacher also expanded on the theme of self-evaluation:

> *I don't think they need to be tested. I think they need, maybe, a kind of form at the end of term saying 'Now do you realise that you can say this, that'... something like that at the beginning of term... And then, at the end of term, 'So now what have you achieved?'.... They have to write down what they think about themselves... and it makes them realise better than a test, I think, what they can do because they write about themselves.*

These views suggest that the use of learner self-assessment is an area which merits further investigation.

6. Conclusion

The fact that, of the 11 learners out of 17 who took the first test (one learner was absent), all 11 voluntarily took the third test, seems to argue that the tests were not a negative experience for these learners and that they found them of value. This interpretation is further borne out by the reasons given by these learners for taking the tests, and also by various comments made by learners during interview.

What is interesting is that none of the learners who opted not to take the tests at the beginning changed their minds about taking the tests later on, despite their agreement that the tests were non-threatening and reflected normal classroom practice. At the end of term, these learners did, however, indicate that such tests should be offered in IALS community courses, something they had not agreed with at the beginning of term.

Concern over the frequency of the tests was expressed by some learners, and one teacher proposed an optional end-of-term test while the other favoured a self-assessment instrument rather than formal tests.

Those learners who took the tests found, without exception, that the assessment feedback form was useful to them. Learners who were interviewed also gave verbal testimonies as to the usefulness of the tests in general, three learners stating that one of the major benefits of this type of oral test was that they were actually forced into speaking, rather than just being able to say to themselves *"I can't do this"* or *"I'll have to look this up in the book"*. Two learners reported an almost immediate gain in self-confidence in speaking as a result of being *"forced to perform"* in this way.

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Interviews with learners and teachers alike confirmed that the relaxed classroom atmosphere was not disrupted by the test. This was probably due in large part to the care which had been taken to integrate the tests into the normal classroom pattern. This was mimicked both by test activity-type and the fact of sitting in the same classroom, with the same classmates and teacher as usual although the change in role from class teacher to assessor can bring its own problems in a few cases.

The practical issues of administering the tests in class time, from the teachers' point of view, relate to the concentration required from the teacher in screening out the noise of others talking and the time taken out of lesson time for the test. The latter point, however, appears to be a concern of the teachers alone and was not evident from the learners' views. The fact of having testees and non-testees in class at the same time does not appear to have been a problem with the learners themselves because of the alternative activities offered.

The sample is too small to permit any general conclusions and results may be different with different language proficiency levels. Although the results are encouraging, we cannot claim that there is overwhelming enthusiasm for testing in adult community classes. However, we have shown in part that formal testing at this level of ability is possible within class time, as we believe that the difficulties encountered by the class teachers could be overcome through familiarity with and training in assessment procedures. We also believe that other forms of measuring learner progress and the issue of self-assessment are fruitful areas for research and development.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Sample Test Activity (with accompanying advertising material - pictures and some text)

ACTIVITÉ 2: QUELQUES JOURS DE VACANCES ou UN PETIT VOYAGE

Vous êtes en vacances ensemble en France. Vous voulez faire un petit voyage ou faire une petite excursion.

Regardez les publicités et décidez ensemble

- où voulez-vous aller?
- que voulez-vous faire?

Comparez/discutez
- les hôtels
- les activités
- les prix
- autre chose....?

Vous pouvez faire des suggestions à votre ami pour le persuader.

Vous pouvez être d'accord ou pas d'accord.

Si vous voulez être testé, parlez ensemble pendant 3-4 minutes. ☺

Votre partenaire va vous écouter.

Appendix B:

Performance Description of a Lower Elementary learner

The learner possesses enough self-confidence to communicate in the target language well enough to be understood in simple situations and has enough resources to use a number of repair strategies. The learner is still short of vocabulary outside everyday needs and requires the cooperation of a patient, well-meaning listener.

Appendix C:

Post-Test Questionnaire

LOWER ELEMENTARY

As a follow-up to your French class this term, please could you help us by filling in this questionnaire:

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. The Assessments which we offered in class this term

Test 1.

- **Did you take the first test?** yes no
- **At what point did you decide to take/not to take the first test? (Please tick only one box)**

When I first heard about it (i.e. before I saw the test)

After I had seen the test activity

After we had practised the activity in class

Could you give your reasons for taking/not taking the first test:

Test 2.

- **Did you take the second test?** yes no
- **At what point did you decide to take/not to take the second test? (Please tick only one box)**

When I first heard about it (i.e. before I saw the test)

After I had seen the test activity

After we had practised the activity in class

Could you give your reasons for taking/not taking the second test:

Test 3.

- **Did you take the third test?** yes no
- **At what point did you decide to take/not to take the third test?**
  (Please tick only one box)

When I first heard about it (ie before I saw the test)

After I had seen the test activity

After we had practised the activity in class

Could you give your reasons for taking/not taking the third test:

2. Written Assessments

- **Did you find the assessment sheet(s) which the teacher returned to you useful?**

yes no

Are there any comments you would like to make regarding the feedback you were given? (e.g. Would you have liked other/more detailed information?)

- **Did you act on the assessment sheet(s) in any way?**
  (e.g. more revision, use of Self-Access Centre, etc.) yes no

In what way, if any, did you act on the feedback?

3. While the others did the Test

- **If you decided not to do any or all of the tests, how did you feel about doing the alternative activities which you used while some of the class were being tested?**
  (Please write your answer in the box below.)

4. Attitudes to being assessed in class

- **At the beginning of the term we asked you how you felt about having an oral test in French. How do you feel about it now? Does the idea....?**
  (Please tick only one box)

appal you

arouse feelings of mild anxiety

leave you indifferent

give you a feeling of pleasurable challenge

fill you with joy

If you have any comments to add, please write them in this box:

- **Do you think that oral tests should be offered in a French community class at IALS?**

yes

no

If you have any comments to add, please write them in this box:

5. Self Assessment

At the beginning of term we asked you how well you felt you could do the following things in French (i.e. get your message across orally and understand the answers reasonably well.) Without trying to remember what you put then, how well, at this point, do you think you can do the following things?

	easily	**with a little effort**	**with difficulty**	**not at all**
ask for things in a shop				
tell someone about yourself & your family				
give directions to a lost French tourist in Edinburgh				
order a meal in a restaurant				

6. **Finally, for research reasons, we would like to ask you the following information about yourself:**

What is your job?

Which of the following age groups do you fall into?

18-22
23-30
31-40
41-50
51-60
60+

Thank you very much.

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